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ABSTRACT

Aspects of monitoring and evaluating programs for visually handicapped students are examined. The certification/accreditation program evaluation design is considered in terms of advantages and disadvantages. Roles of governmental (state and federal) and voluntary agencies are discussed. The functions of the National Accreditation Council of Agencies Serving the Blind and Visually Handicapped (NAC) in accreditation of residential schools is described, although it is pointed out that NAC has no mechanism to accredit school district or regional day programs for visually handicapped children. (CL)

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MONITORING PROGRAM QUALITY: WHO AND HOW SHOULD IT BE DONE?

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Introduction

The first stage in implementing P.L. 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, is now well under way, namely, to provide an educational program for all handicapped children in the least restrictive environment. The next stage lies ahead: to provide an appropriate educational program. . . . What is appropriate? The dictionary tells us that "appropriate" means "fitting" or "proper". Thus, providing an appropriate program implies that a judgement about quality must be made. Critical questions about quality include: what is it; who should monitor it; and how should it be monitored. Answers to these questions are at best elusive but it is essential that we attempt to find a solution because if we as educators do not come to grips with the quality issue, someone outside the system will do it for us, e.g., the legislative or judicial bodies at both federal and state levels. Our purpose is to raise some basic questions about the "what" "who" and "how" as they relate to quality educational programs for visually handicapped pupils.

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Defining What We Mean: The What

Program Quality

Any consideration of quality is based on two supposedly foregone conclusions: (1) that program quality is accepted as a major concern in educating visually handicapped children, and (2) that monitoring to assure quality of program is accepted as desirable and even necessary. Although most professionals, trained and experienced in working with visually handicapped children would support these positions, are there others who would do so? Our former students? Our present students? Parents? Non-school agencies? The decision makers at the state and federal levels? The courts? Of course if you ask them: "Do you think quality of program is important?," they will respond with the apple pie, motherhood, flag and country answer: "Of course, absolutely, top priority!" But each one speaks his own langauge. Parents, for example, may interpret "quality of program" according to how well their child is doing at school: if he is an "A" student, they may think the quality of the program is excellent; if he is retarded, they may consider the quality of the program poor if the child does not qualify for college admission, even if we have successfully taught him to take care of his own personal needs and to repair bicycles under supervision. The state and federal decision makers may interpret "quality of program" as strictly "quality of IEP", since from their point of view there is only an individual program--no other programming exists. The courts act on any obvious breach of legal obligation, but too often search for some remote technicality, such as the fact that the youngster's IEP conference notice was not written in Japanese, to then magnanimously award the parents damages of hard-earned taxpayer dollars, and the child is banished to the program where the parents wanted him in the first place, but where

the professionals believed his educational needs would not be met.

Thus the word, program, conjures up different images in persons from different backgrounds or different points of view. If there is no recognition at state or federal levels of "a specific program for visually handicapped", then monitoring IEP's for individual children for the purpose, first, of assuring IEP quality, and, second, of monitoring actual classroom activities to assure that the given IEP's were being scrupulously and attentively followed would accomplish the goal of determining quality.

This process of determining quality, however, is not what we have in mind. What we mean by a quality program is one designed especially for visually handicapped children, including all the necessary alternatives from which to select those portions that are appropriate for a given youngster and are to be spelled out in the IEP. Thus a quality program includes a variety of curricula, a variety of instructional materials, a range of services, and degrees of mainstreaming. We have only recently begun to spell out the basic elements of a specific special education program for visually handicapped children (Scholl & Weihl, 1979; Spungin, 1978; Stager, 1976).

Monitoring

Once we have defined what we mean when we use the term quality program, then we can move to the next step in our consideration: a definition of monitoring. From the etymology of the word, derived from the Latin monere, we know it is basically a warning action. Following the recent events at Three Mile Island a group of neighborhood volunteer monitors was recruited and outfitted with special equipment to take periodic readings on levels of radiation in the atmosphere within a specified radius of Three Mile Island. Obviously the purpose of this local effort is to detect systematically by

mechanical means any deviation from a predetermined standard in the level of radiation in order to warn the citizenry in time for whatever corrective action is indicated. Similarly, BEH and SEAs are now monitoring schools' and school districts' activities on behalf of handicapped children to determine whether they are complying with federal mandates. Some SEAs are also monitoring compliance with state mandates through the same or similar procedures.

A critical question is whether monitoring is the route to go if we are talking about quality in a given specific program. If so, what aspects lend themselves to monitoring routinely, easily, mechanically, without on-hand programmatic expertise perhaps, on a periodic basis, and non-judgmentally? We might think of teacher-student ratios, curricular offerings, types of specialized instructional materials and equipment, teacher certification, lighting, storage space, non-discriminatory testing and a host of other characteristics. If as professionals we wish to develop and propose guidelines for judging quality of visually handicapped programs, it would appear that we could identify those items that could be generically monitored and, in fact, may already be included in the monitoring systems adopted by states; but concurrently we must develop standards that would incorporate quality programs that retain the integrity of the specific categorical program standard. For this we need an acceptable process of program evaluation.

Program Evaluation

There is considerable discussion today about assessing the quality of all types of service programs through program evaluation. This is a much discussed process with little agreement about what it means. P.L. 94-142 mandates that program evaluation be done but leaves the process and procedures for

doing it up to the local/state agencies.

General education has for many years used the certification/accreditation model for program evaluation. This model includes three major steps: (1) professionals from the field involved have agreed to a set of standards about what constitutes a quality program and have developed an instrument to assess a program against those standards; (2) all staff members of a school study their program intensively using a standard guide designed to assess whether the program meets the agreed-to standards; and (3) the document prepared by the staff is validated through an intensive study by an outside group of professionals. In the case of accreditation, a fourth step is the granting/withholding of a "certification" of quality by a recognized accrediting body.

As with any model or process of program evaluation, certification/accreditation has its advantages and disadvantages (Webster & Stufflebeam, 1978). Its disadvantages include: there are difficulties in formulating accepted standards by consensus; the cost in staff time to do the self-study thoroughly and well is great; the results yield minimal quantitative data; and objectivity, reliability, and validity of the self-study instrument are usually not known. Advantages include: immediate feedback is provided to the staff for program improvement; the process includes both internal and external reviews; and all staff members are involved in the process.

In spite of its defects, the certification/accreditation program evaluation design appropriately followed may be effective in improving program quality and may be an effective mechanism for monitoring as well.

The Who and How

From the foregoing, it would appear that a variety of agencies may have roles in monitoring and program evaluation: governmental, both state and federal; and voluntary.

Governmental

Currently both state and federal "monitors" review local district programs for handicapped children. Their major function is to determine whether the programs are consistent or in compliance with state and federal legislative mandates. The procedures followed by these governmental agencies are consistent with the certification/accreditation program evaluation design. The legislative mandates, both state and federal, provide the "standards"; the accompanying rules and regulations supply the specifics for how the LEA should be meeting the standards; the SEA/LEA describe in detail in their proposals for funding or state plans how the educational program provided for the children will meet the standards; the governmental agency requires periodic written documentation of the extent to which the program is consistent with and carries out procedures included in the proposal and finally, a site visit team is dispatched to take a formal indepth look at the program. This monitoring process could be used to improve program quality provided that qualitative aspects are included as well as quantitative. Unfortunately, most monitoring at the present time is based on the quantitative.

With some additions, it is possible that the current governmental monitoring system could become a program evaluation process, involving recommendations for periodic self-evaluation, frequent on-site visits by the SEA vision consultant, and cyclical formal evaluations by teams consisting of practioners from other programs, such as, faculty from colleges

and universities, and representatives from parents and consumer groups. Such program evaluation would begin where monitoring left off, would consider how the program has developed and where it is directed, how it compares to other programs elsewhere, and what it should concentrate on to improve its quality in the future.

The national guidelines would need to include specific program standards, which would differentiate non-judgmental aspects that can be observed and reported by a generalist (i.e., monitored), from those which require program expertise which should be subject to judgment by specialists and others familiar with the field (i.e., evaluated). Thus, with some modifications and additions, the monitoring process of the state and federal agencies might be expanded to incorporate more features required for program evaluation.

Voluntary Accreditation

Accreditation is a familiar concept to most educators at the secondary and post-secondary levels. Accreditation is a system or a process by which agreed upon standards are applied to a particular educational setting. When awarded, accreditation demonstrates to interested professionals, consumers, and the general public that a specific educational setting substantially meets the standards agreed upon.

The accreditation process has the following characteristics: it is voluntary; it emphasizes self-improvement rather than inspection or policing; it requires broad participation by appropriate and interested agencies and individuals; it uses peer expertise; and it provides a method for knowledge interchange.

Accreditation has two principal purposes: to stimulate improvement in the management and services of an agency or school; and to give public

recognition to the agency or school that it is in compliance with accepted standards. Accreditation, therefore, is a system of accountability, and signifies that a school is accountable to its consumers, that is, the children being educated and their parents; to tax payers and others who financially contribute to the operation of the school; and to the profession.

Secondary and post-secondary schools seek accreditation from one of the regional accrediting agencies: New England, Middle States, Southern, North Central, Northwest or Western Associations. Elementary and middle/junior high schools seek accreditation less often. When a residential school for the visually handicapped seeks accreditation, some of the agencies have used NAC instruments in the absence of their own standards regarding the education of visually handicapped children. A joint review may result in dual accreditation by both the Regional Association and by NAC. However, each decision is arrived at independently.

Day programs for any categorical area are usually not included in an accreditation review because appropriate standards and instruments for the self-study are lacking. Since the initiation of NAC, educators in day school programs for the visually impaired have sought evaluation instruments and procedures to affect program improvement. Two projects have been completed recently that are related to program evaluation of day school programs. Under the leadership of the American Foundation for the Blind, guidelines for administrators were developed and field-tested (Spungin, 1978). Although called "guidelines", the document may be considered as including "standards" since the practices and procedures stipulated were arrived at by consensus. Additionally, a self-study and evaluation guide for day programs was completed and field-tested at the University of Michigan through a project funded by the National Study of School Evaluation (Scholl, 1979). These two

documents may encourage the regional accrediting agencies to employ these specialized instruments when reviewing a school that includes a class or program for visually handicapped children and adolescents.

For over ten years, the National Accreditation Council of Agencies Serving the Blind and Visually Handicapped (NAC) has served as a monitor of quality for educational programs in residential schools for the visually impaired through the accreditation process. The program evaluation model followed by NAC is one of staff self-study and validation by an on-site review team. The standards for educational programs were developed by professionals and consumers in the area of the visually handicapped in 1966 (COMSTAC, 1966). These standards and the accompanying self-study guide were used by residential schools for accreditation purposes until 1979 when a revision was published (NAC, 1979).

A residential school seeking NAC accreditation goes through the following steps: (1) a formal application is made to NAC; (2) the school undertakes an intensive self-evaluation to help the staff clarify goals and objectives and determine whether the program provided is consistent with these goals and objectives; (3) a team of consumers and peer professionals makes an on-site visit to determine whether the school meets acceptable standards; (4) the Commission on Accreditation reviews the findings and makes a determination regarding accreditation; (5) the decision and team report, including commendations and recommendations, is sent to the school to be used as a basis for program improvement.

Presently, there is no mechanism within NAC to accredit school district or regional day programs for visually handicapped children. However, NAC is committed to quality education for all visually handicapped children and is willing to cooperate with efforts of groups working toward improving

education for these children by employing the accreditation model.

In summary, accreditation is a voluntary process, uniquely American, and provides an excellent balance to the regulatory functions of the state and federal government. The National Accreditation Council is committed to quality education for all visually impaired children and youth and stands ready to assist, in any way possible in improving the quality of educational programs in whatever setting they may be conducted.

Summary

Monitoring program quality is of concern to all of us if we are to assure excellence in education for visually handicapped children, regardless of where they may reside or which setting, residential or day school, they may attend as their least restrictive environment. In the future we can anticipate greater mobility in the school population of visually handicapped children not only geographically but also between various program settings in the continuum of options in the service delivery system. Some assurances of quality control must be established in order to facilitate this movement.

Currently, federal and state agencies serve primarily in a monitoring or regulatory role with greater emphasis on the quantitative and generic aspects. For residential schools accreditation by the National Accreditation Council serves as the third leg with the regulatory functions of the state and federal government as the other two legs. At the present time, the third leg is missing for day programs. Should program evaluation by specialists in education of the visually handicapped be added to the current state/federal monitoring system through the development of national guidelines or standards? Should the voluntary accrediting agencies, such as NAC, be encouraged to add this function to their activities? Should a new accrediting

body be developed to perform this function? These are questions that deserve our consideration in the immediate future because unless we make a supreme effort to assess and improve program quality and do it properly, it will be done for us in five or ten years, or as much time as it takes to re-invent the wheel. By then we may have too many casualties from the present situation: blind children who will be taught print reading skills when it is not appropriate; low vision children who are taught braille when it is not appropriate; dyslexics with normal vision improperly labelled visually handicapped; intelligent deaf-blind children who are taught as though retarded, and school systems enrolling visually handicapped children bankrupt through suits brought by parents because we failed their children today. We have a lot of work to do. We should be doing it--not just sitting around lamenting and discussing that something has to be done.

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